



History of ACT

Conflict in a Town and Gown City

The shifting demographics of single family neighborhoods from full-time resident homeowners to short-term student renters can produce cross-cultural conflict and tension, particularly with noise and disturbances from loud parties late at night. In 2007, San Marcos police handled 2,833 noise complaints – the most frequent 9-1-1 call for service.

In terms of volume, the highest number of noise calls for service generally occurred at apartment complexes. The apartment residents were disturbed by noise and parties and officers expressed frustration with gatherings, especially those in the common areas such as a pool or volleyball court. Daytime parties were often had with the consent of management. Because the events were marketing tools, some properties would provide kegs of beer and live music to attract potential residents. At one property, approximately 3,500 people showed up on a Sunday afternoon after an open posting on a social media site.

Traditional enforcement efforts to curb noisy gatherings netted no significant improvement. Permanent residents were aggravated. Students felt they were being treated unfairly, and the police became trapped between conflicting community expectations that enforcement ranged from “not enough” to “too harsh”. It was apparent there had to be a change to effect long-term transformation in reducing the rate or impact of repeat crimes and disorder to improve quality of life.

Collaboration is Key

One way to get through turbulence is to create new norms. In 2008, the City of San Marcos and Texas State University joined in a historic partnership for comprehensive analysis, response, and assessment of noise and common sources of conflict in a town and gown city. This included a new understanding of noise, an overhaul of police responses, a streamlining of city ordinances, establishing host and guest responsibilities at gatherings, proactive policing of trouble spots and partnerships with property owners, managers, and community members.

For solutions to be effective, noise could no longer be the expected by-product of youthful gatherings. A new view of noise as harmful was necessary. Noise injures people physiologically, socially, and psychologically. It can be a potent stressor. Noise can be extremely detrimental when it interrupts sleep or relaxation. This new paradigm about noise permitted a better understanding of how noise affects livability in a neighborhood. Noise can diminish quality of life, reduce property values, and result in a neighborhood being a less desirable place to live.

The ACT Campaign

The collaborative effort birthed the ACT (Achieving Community Together). One of the first steps in the ACT campaign was to establish a common mission between the stakeholders. A familiar cry from the San Marcos community was for the University to “do something” regarding off-campus conduct, implying punitive sanctions. The University focused on positive steps to develop student success leading to graduation. This understanding of the University’s mission led to the common goal – retention of students. For the University, engaged and contributing students stay in school. For the community, engaged and contributing students make good choices and do not disrupt quality of life in neighborhoods.

The ACT Campaign committee has broad-based membership and includes City of San Marcos representatives from the San Marcos Police Department, Code Enforcement, and Neighborhood Services. University members include the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Dean of Students, the LBJ Student Center (Campus Activities and Student Organizations, Off Campus Student Services), the Texas State University Police Department, Housing and Residential Life, the Attorney for Students, Community Relations, and Associated Student Government. Community representatives include the San Marcos Council of Neighborhood Associations and Hays County Dispute Resolution Center. The committee’s charge is to create a resident culture of care, cooperativeness, and collaboration.

The ACT committee meets on a monthly basis and in conjunction with the Austin Apartment Association meets with local property managers and owners on a quarterly basis. These partnerships are intended to reduce the sources of conflict in a town and gown city by shifting the emphasis from enforcement to education and community influence.

The educational efforts of the benefits in reducing noise are promoted in various ways. Students learn how to hold a responsible gathering and avoid having the police respond and issue an expensive citation. Property owners and apartment managers learn the financial reality that noise does not operate in a vacuum. Tenants with noise problems generally have other issues, such as late payment of rent, damaging or abusing the property, and attracting other criminal activity such as assaults, thefts, and burglaries. All these conditions can result in increased make ready costs for landlords at turnover. The police learn how to reduce the demand on resources, which frees officers to focus on other pressing issues. For the University and parents, it means students staying in school.

ACT education for students demonstrates how to transition successfully to off-campus housing and live in the community. For permanent residents, it means learning how to develop positive interactions with students and to deal with changing neighborhoods

Building a Resilient Community

The ACT program has been recognized on state, national, and international levels for effective problem solving and creating sustainable partnerships. In four years, noise complaints dropped 16.3% and arrests and citations 43.6% despite a 25.4% overall increase in police calls for service for the same time frame.

ACT blends research with “boots on the ground” experience plus student affairs and academics to create a map for building a resilient community through collaboration, team work, and respect.

The ACT campaign is a long-term project because every year San Marcos has a new crop of student residents who move into the community. The ongoing nature of this project seeks to institutionalize problem-solving, communication and integration of new citizens coming to San Marcos. The close partnership of city and university, permanent and student residents creates maps for cross-cultural communication. The ACT campaign takes the view point of a person as a global citizen. ACT demonstrates how to transform people from temporary visitors to full time citizens—whether they choose to live permanently in San Marcos or move to another community.